

ROY MEACHUM



Viewpoint

The new 'yellow journalism'

America's media learned their lesson. Battered by criticism of their coverage of the TWA hijacking, television news organizations seemed to compete with each other — like boys at a game — in proving their 100 percent Americanism last week. There was little attempt at balance.

Every turn in the twisting, tangled cruise-ship piracy was prejudged and presented the way the media assumed the U.S. public wanted to hear it; everything was boiled down to black and white.

With their blood-lust up, Americans were not prepared for any hesitation by other governments in marching lock-step with the White House. In the process, the public — goaded by the media — transformed the U.S. government into a bully's role. Egypt suffered the most damage. Italy and Yugoslavia also took their licks.

These are different nations. When Washington demands their strict compliance with its dictates, it portrays them as puppets; this is how Moscow treats the Eastern Bloc. But Rome and Belgrade have value as America's allies, precisely because they are independent.

Fortunately for the United States, and its leadership role among the countries of the free world, the White House toned down its pressure on Italy and Yugoslavia; it came to a screeching halt. Reason triumphed over hysteria.

With the news media leading the way, the American public demanded the arrest of Muhammad Abul Abbas, *suspected* as the leader of the cruise ship pirates. The United States claimed it had conclusive proof, but failed to convince Rome and Belgrade. Instead Italy and Yugoslavia acknowledged Abul Abbas' role in releasing the ship's hostages — and gave the Palestinian public thanks. (By the way, the man's "last" name is Abul Abbas: the father of Abbas, in English. America's media, in shortening his name, reveal their own lack of knowledge about Arabs.)

Having failed to force Rome to yield the four Palestinians accused of murder, Washington threw a fit over the failure to land Abul Abbas. The charge was conspiracy; but on that count, Israel should have demanded extradition — if there was proof. The planned goal of the ship's pirates was an attack on the Israeli port of Ashdod; it was a suicide mission in retaliation for the raid on Tunis. Nothing on the public record indicates Abul Abbas conspired to hijack the ship.

Washington proposed to land a man wanted by the Israelis. Lawyers may argue otherwise, but there is no proof on the public record that Abul Abbas intended any harm to Americans. Of course, this is not what the U.S. public wanted to hear.

One week after the cruise ship was seized, the media continue to feed Americans' thirst for revenge. High administration officials played their part.

Attorney General Ed Meese hinted another military operation would be mounted to snatch Abul Abbas; he has thwarted Israeli attempts for years. U.S. Secretary of the Treasury James Baker joined in the chorus, calling for revenge.

Defense Secretary Casper Wineberger stood apart; he resisted first orders to send Navy jets to down the Egyptian airliner. Wineberger expressed concern for the damage to America's staunch supporter, Egyptian Husni Mubarak. The damage is there. It remains to be seen how his